

The Rise and Fall of the *Ecoles Populaires Kanak* in New Caledonia

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1. Introduction

Launched officially at the second congress of the *Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste* (FLNKS) in February 1985, the *Ecoles Populaires Kanak* (EPK) movement grew to include dozens of schools, hundreds of volunteer *animateurs* and thousands of pupils throughout the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia. The EPK represented a rejection of French education in favour of an alternative where everything from the language of instruction through to timetabling was designed to meet the aspirations of the indigenous Kanak people. Today, the national structure of the EPK no longer exists, although its vision is still widely shared and the remaining school in Gossannah in the north of the island of Ouvéa is thriving.

This paper examines the rise and fall of the EPK. It discusses the origins of the ideas behind the EPK, the political context which led to these being put into practice and the achievements of the EPK. It then analyses the many types of opposition the EPK encountered. The clearest was that which came from the French Government and other pro-colonial forces. However, the EPK was also under siege from within the independence movement where, for different reasons, it found opponents in both radical and conservative groupings.

This paper argues that the EPK's close association with a formal political structure was both its strength and its weakness. It argues that the EPK was a casualty of the division and demobilisation of the Kanak independence movement that France was able to achieve through the 1988 Matignon Accords.

2. The Context - a Brief Outline

The EPK grew out of Kanak frustration with French colonial education. Kanak people were determined to regain control of their own education, as an integral part of their struggle to achieve independence. It is therefore necessary to present a brief historical outline of some of the characteristics of French colonial rule in New Caledonia, particularly as they apply to education.

Colonial relations in New Caledonia before World War Two were highly antagonistic; among the worst in the Pacific. Kanak people had been forcibly driven from their lands and confined in small, isolated and infertile reserves. French authority over Kanak people was maintained through a collection of repressive measures known as the *Code de l'Indigenat* (Native Law) which, among other things, prohibited Kanak people from leaving their

reserves, imposed a forced labour regime, and established very severe sanctions against transgressors.

Kanak people rebelled against colonial rule throughout the latter half of the 19th century and again in 1917. However these uprisings were suppressed and, for several decades, Kanak people lost the capacity to resist. This undermining of Kanak resistance was aided by the fact that when colonial policy in New Caledonia was eventually liberalised in the immediate post-war period, the change did not come about as the outcome of Kanak political struggle. Rather, New Caledonia was included in a broader reform of France's relations with its overseas possessions.

In New Caledonia, the post-war liberalisation saw the end of the Native Law and the beginning of a new policy that sought to integrate Kanak people into the rest of society. It did so, however, in such a way that Kanak people would remain at the lowest levels of that society. Education was an important mechanism for achieving the integrationist goal. The post-war reform of education in New Caledonia focused on increasing Kanak access to public schools. In 1953, primary schooling was made free and compulsory and in 1956, Kanak students were permitted for the first time to attend a public secondary school.

For the vast majority of Kanak children, primary schooling took place in their tribal areas in schools that were sub-standard: severely under-resourced; teaching in an alien language a curriculum that was imported unchanged from France; and staffed by young, untrained Kanak *moniteurs* (teaching assistants). Hninö Wéa, who later established the successful Gossannah EPK, has spoken of being appointed in the early 1960s to run a sole charge school in the tribe of Wawé as an 18 year old boy with only a primary school leaving certificate and no teacher training.

'When I arrived, even the parents didn't know that I was coming. When I arrived, I went to see the parents to tell them that I had come to teach at the school. I didn't even know who I was supposed to see in the tribe. I just landed there. I knew no-one. I didn't even know the area. I was a total stranger there. I am Kanak, but I was only 18 and I knew nothing at all about that region. I just had to do the best I could'.

The school's 15 pupils were aged between five and twelve years old. The younger ones spoke no French at all and their language (Neku) and Hninö's (Iaai) were mutually incomprehensible. The school consisted of one classroom made of straw and earth with a wasp nest in the wall and holes in the roof. Wéa had no supervision or even any contact with the educational authorities; only the occasional visit from the nearest gendarme to make sure he had not abandoned his post, as so many in his position did.

It is not surprising, therefore, that increased access to schooling by Kanak pupils did not translate into high levels of academic success. It was not until 1962 that the first Kanak passed the baccalauréat¹, the qualification needed to enter university. Kanak pupils still seriously underachieve in education in comparison to all other ethnic groups, especially Europeans, although since 1993, the Vice-Rectorat has stopped releasing an ethnic breakdown of educational statistics [see Small, 1995].

In the late 1960s, a new generation of Kanak youth reignited the anti-colonial struggle. As both Dornoy [1984: 263] and Ward [1982: 49] have recognised, next to land, education has been the most important focus of Kanak resistance. French colonial education was seen not as a vehicle for progress and development, but as an instrument of domination and control. As *Groupe 1878*, one of the early radical groups noted:

'We received domination education, that is education whose aim was not to take account of the local people's way of thinking and acting, but oriented in such a way that the traditional past be not given any emphasis' [*Andi Ma Dhô*. July 1976].

In the late 1970s, two major campaigns in particular brought educational issues to the forefront of the anti-colonial struggle: the 1976-78 occupation of a hostel for New Caledonian students in Paris by Kanak students and military conscripts; and a prolonged series of educationally focused mobilisations and confrontations between 1979 and 1981 in response to anti-Kanak practices by New Caledonia's educational authorities such as the dismissal of Kanak and pro-Kanak teachers. These actions, as well as the broader political movement that they grew out of and in turn fuelled, heightened Kanak political awareness and action.

3. The FLNKS and the Creation of the EPK

In 1984, the Kanak independence movement, which had been led since 1979 by the five-party Independence Front, reconstituted itself as the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) and stepped up its campaign for Kanak socialist independence.

Disillusioned with the piecemeal reforms of the French Socialist Party administration, the FLNKS adopted a policy of removing itself from and actively disrupting colonial structures and institutions. This strategy of rupture began with the boycott of the November 1984 territorial elections. The campaign also involved land occupations, economic disruption and a boycott of colonial schools.

¹ Boniface Ounou.

At its second congress in Nakety in February 1985, the FLNKS decided that children would not be sent back to the colonial schools the following month. Rather, they would attend EPK that were to be established and would operate in ways consistent with the political, economic and cultural aims of the FLNKS.

The EPK began with around 1,500 pupils. This figure represented just six per cent of the 25,000 Kanak pupils who were enrolled in the territory's schools in 1984. Nevertheless, given the inherent risks involved in taking part in the move and that there was considerable opposition to it even within the FLNKS, it was a substantial number. The EPK pupils were taught in a total of 46 schools. Some of these schools represented the majority of pupils in their area with others being in quite marginal situations. Many areas were without an EPK, and some children from these areas would travel to attend an EPK elsewhere.

A total of 264 people worked as *animateurs*² in these schools. At the beginning all worked voluntarily. However, after nine months the Canala EPK began giving some remuneration to its workers and in some other EPK, contributions of produce or labour were made.

The facilities of each EPK were locally organised. Construction of desks, chairs and buildings was a community activity. In some cases, school buildings such as classrooms and cooking areas were also locally built, although a number of EPK occupied buildings that had previously been used by the colonial school system.

The first national meeting of all the EPK was held in Ponerihouen in August 1985. The 'National Structure' was put in place as a coordinating body with representation from the various EPK regions, and a process was set in train for the development of programmes and interchange of ideas. The EPK convention was conscious of a lack of support on the part of many within the FLNKS leadership. This lukewarm support had been reflected in Motion Five of the Third FLNKS Congress in Hienghène in May 1985 which began:

'The FLNKS decides to halt the school boycott and asks parents to send their children to school, leaving them the choice of this school. Of course, the popular school is maintained' [EDIPOP, undated].

Under pressure from its rank and file members, the November 1985 Congress of the FLNKS extended official recognition to the EPK, acknowledging it as an 'indispensable structure in the liberation struggle of the Kanak people'. Despite this formal acceptance, however, the FLNKS remained deeply divided over the issue of support for the EPK; divisions that will be examined in more detail below.

² animators or teachers

An important feature of the EPK, especially in the early years, was its capacity to attract broad community involvement and generate positive feelings towards the school. Pupils at the EPK derived an unprecedented level of enjoyment from coming to school, and communities that could sustain an EPK were proud of what they had been able to achieve against powerful odds. With collectively determined content and weekly evaluations of classes, *animateurs* were kept extremely busy, as Henri Ankaiuliwa from Ouvéa explained in 1988:

'At the beginning, the pupils who had been to the colonial schools were too timid to offer criticisms. But now we have children as young as eight or nine years old making very mature contributions to the evaluation process. I spent ten years teaching in the colonial schools and I never come home as exhausted as I do now.'

Dominique Humbert, a European animateur in Nadjo, Lifou, who had been a focus of resistance in 1980 when he was dismissed for political reasons from the Catholic school in Ouvéa, was impressed by the extent of community commitment to the EPK when it began:

'One of the successes of our EPK notably at the beginning - after then it died away - was the willingness of the parents to participate to give their time, their ideas, their all, within the EPK. They were there, they came to do carvings, songs, they brought their creativity. In other words, it was their EPK and they were training themselves as well.'

He echoed Ankaiuliwa's comments about the levels of commitment that were demanded of and given by all those involved:

'There was such a willingness for people to train themselves, it was amazing. Guys would go kilometres on foot to attend meetings and it took many forms ... we organised seminars, meetings. There was so much going on, a real profusion of activities... You wouldn't believe the amount of work that was produced by the group of *animateurs*, forty or fifty of us. We started at 8am and finished at midnight and then we saw people were asking for more of it'.

From its inception, the EPK movement embarked upon a deliberate strategy of redefining schooling in the interests of Kanak people. In doing so, it was making an explicit attempt to develop an education system that would serve two purposes: to assist in the struggle to achieve Kanak socialist independence; and to equip people to take their place in a future independent Kanak state.

It should be noted, however, that there was a recognition within EPK that, of themselves, educational initiatives, whether in the form of school reform or the establishment of an alternative system, would not result in the fundamental change that was sought:

'The EPK, like any school, cannot change the entire society by itself. Society changes through change in all of its components. But in the liberation struggle of the Kanak people, the EPK has a function which goes beyond the simple functions of the colonial school' [*Bwenando*. 5 September 1985: 9].

The EPK, therefore, saw an interdependence between itself and the FLNKS. It believed that its educational work was an essential element of the FLNKS, and it saw the national liberation struggle such as that being waged by the FLNKS as the only appropriate context within which it could operate.

The EPK argued that colonial schools were integrating Kanak people into colonial society in such a way that they were gaining very few benefits since they consistently occupied the lowest social stations - 'the slums, the reserves, the unemployed'. Yet at the same time Kanak people were steadily losing their remaining independent means for social advancement by being made dependent on colonial society. The colonial school, it was argued:

'favours the educational failure of Kanak children ... it completely ignores the real needs of the country to the point of alienating minds to make a beneficiary of the Kanak people and to make the country a devotee of the cultural hegemony of French imperialism' [EPK, 1985].

Another major concern of the EPK was the danger it saw in retaining the essence of the colonial school after independence. It saw this as contributing to the risk of an undesirable neocolonial system developing in New Caledonia. In particular, it warned that such an eventuality could result in a school system which would be dependent for its upkeep and running on foreign aid [EPK, undated: 4].

As might be expected of an arm of an independence movement, the EPK mounted a particularly strong critique of the colonial school system's orientation to encourage pupils to identify with and admire the achievements of the French nation. As Simon Naaoutchoué, Minister of Education in the FLNKS Provisional Government, remarked:

'We know the French aim is to imprison our children's minds; to make them think in a straight line to France and nowhere else'.

As well as flags and anthems of France, French nationalism was also promoted through literature, geography and history. It had been promoted virtually uncontested through the 1950s and 60s. And although some of the excesses of this had been modified more recently as a result of Kanak pressure, French values were still reflected in a deep way.

"Of course we no longer learn 'our ancestors the Gauls', but the ideological content of schooling remains", insisted the EPK [1985]. The French-defined notions of citizenship that were being generated and reinforced among Kanak people in colonial schools were seen to be undermining both the desire to struggle for independence and the kinds of values and attitudes that would be needed for the construction of a new independent Kanak state.

The EPK was committed to building a new society within which 'social relations would be radically different from those which prevail in colonial society', and it saw its role as constructing an education system which would correspond to those new social relations [EPK, undated: 3]. It was concerned, however, that the FLNKS description of such a society remained very unspecific, leaving the stated goal of Kanak socialist independence as little more than a slogan. The EPK was one of the elements within the movement that argued most vehemently for the FLNKS to address this issue of defining the new society urgently and seriously.

For the EPK, the starting point and primary point of reference for the entire educational process must be traditional Kanak education. The EPK defined for itself an active role in the reproduction of the cultural base of Kanak society; equipping the emerging generations with the values and attitudes that Kanak society would need to flourish, while preparing individuals to be able to feel at ease and function effectively within that society.

4. Opposition and Obstacles: EPK in Retreat

Despite the optimism, enthusiasm and commitment of its origins, the EPK has been reduced to a shadow of its former self. In purely quantitative terms, it had been reduced by the end of 1989 to approximately ten per cent of the numbers of people it had included at its foundation convention in Ponerihouen in August 1985. Some new EPK had been established in 1986, notably in Yaté and Pouebo, which along with those of Ouvéa, Témala and Lifou proved among the most durable of the schools. However, numbers had been steadily falling to the point where in the early 1990s just five schools remained within the national structure with around 170 pupils and thirty *animateurs*, as well as occasional helpers. [Structure Nationale, undated: 2]

The EPK National Structure now no longer exists. The EPK in Canala still functions although, having removed itself from the National Structure at an early stage, it had been insulated from some of the more debilitating aspects of the EPK trauma and is, in that sense, an exception. Of those that were part of the EPK movement, only the one in Gossannah is still operating. In fact it is thriving and acts as the mainstay to almost all community activities. The specificities of the Gossannah experience are, however, the subject of a separate study.

For the purposes of this paper, it is pertinent to consider some of the main reasons for the failure of the EPK to realise its aims as a national movement. They fall into three basic categories: first, outside attacks from agents or supporters of continued French colonial rule; secondly, conflicts, mistakes and other problems internal to the EPK; and thirdly and most significantly, opposition to the EPK from within the pro-independence camp.

4.1 Pro-Colonial Opposition

The EPK became the target of opposition from a wide variety of colonial and pro-colonial forces; the educational authorities, the military, social services and right-wing employers. The territory's education authority, the Vice-Rectorat, exerted pressure over its employees or former employees who had defected to the EPK. In some instances, it offered sizeable financial incentives to encourage EPK *animateurs* to come back to the mainstream system.

Even more overt than this type of coercion was that applied by the military. Targeting from the military intensified after the electoral victory of Jacques Chirac's RPR administration in France in 1986, and his appointment of Bernard Pons as Overseas Territories Minister. EPK *animateurs*, many of whom had refused to do their military service or were wanted in connection with political activities as far back as 1984, became the targets of regular attention from the military as part of a counter-insurgency campaign known as 'Nomadisation'. This imposed security problems for a number of EPK, who had to post sentries to warn of the approach of soldiers. In some instances, soldiers would arrive to find schools with no teaching staff.

Parents were also pressurised into withdrawing their children from the EPK. Among Kanak workers, there are many examples of threats coming from employers to the effect that, if they did not withdraw their children from the schools, they would be dismissed [Néchéro-Jorédié, 1988: 214].

Parents were also forced to forego any entitlement to child allowance of up to 6,000 CFP³ per child per month. Access to state-subsidised medical care was also denied them. The justification for these moves was that child-related social services were provided conditional upon attendance at school. The EPK was not recognised as a legitimate school. Therefore, children attending it were officially categorised as truants. This policy angered Naaoutchoué who pointed out that Article 26.1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which France is a signatory, clearly upholds the right of Kanak parents to send their children to the EPK. It reads: 'Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children'.

The imposition of intense financial hardship on already poor parents was compounded by the lack of resources suffered by the EPK themselves. This posed significant difficulties for the EPK, preventing them from purchasing or producing necessary teaching materials or stationery. The lack of financial resources also provided a focus that critics and competitors could highlight in their efforts to dissuade people from sending their children to the EPK. As Naaoutchoué has pointed out, the comparative lack of resources made it difficult for the EPK to present itself as a credible alternative to parents.

'There was the whole conventional school system that continued to function with all their money and materials as against the EPK which was just a few groups of animateurs'.

The funding difficulties were exacerbated by commercial and political allies of the French Government which pursued an active policy of denying resources to the EPK. In one incident, the Banque de l'Indosuez refused to handle a bank draft of NZ\$7,500 which was a grant for the EPK from the New Zealand development agency, Corso. Over a period of nine months, the bank manager employed a series of obstructive measures: demanding extensive documentation from the EPK; then asking for confirmation from Corso about the purpose of the funding; then trying to dissuade Corso from funding the EPK; then citing non-existent regulations about restrictions on the flow of money into New Caledonia; then finally, in a face-to-face meeting with Corso's National Coordinator, declaring that the bank's policy was to not handle any funds destined to the EPK.

The ban on funding the EPK was also enforced by allied governments of France. The New Zealand Government consistently overturned the advice of the VASS⁴ and DEP⁵ advisory committees on subsidising projects of New Zealand non-governmental organisations which involved the EPK. In a document relating to these decisions that was obtained under the

³ approximately US\$60

⁴ Voluntary Agencies Support Scheme

⁵ Development Education Programme

Official Information Act, the Ministry of External Relations and Trade (MERT) advised the Minister:

'The French Government has made known its strong opposition to the work of the EPK which is heavily political and as such goes beyond the field of education'.

4.2 EPK Internal Difficulties

The EPK was also weakened by a number of internal problems. Some of these related to disagreements between EPK over pedagogical or political issues. One of the main divisions of this kind was between the Canala EPK and the rest of the movement which worked within the framework of the National Structure.

After participating in the founding convention in Ponerihouen and the second one in Lifou in February 1986, the Canala EPK absented itself from the rest of the movement. Although no formal withdrawal statement or explanation was ever issued, one of the main concerns was over the role of politics in schooling. Marie-Adèle Néchéro-Jorédié of the Canala EPK accused the broader EPK network of concentrating on too much overtly political work in the schools, at the expense of its primary educational function, a function which was itself intrinsically political.

'Canala is the only EPK where the Project Pedagogy is actually applied. I'm politically active, and in our EPK we've always stressed the pedagogic angle, with politics as an adjunct. Elsewhere, the main aim is to set up a political school and make the tools afterwards' [Néchéro-Jorédié, 1988: 217].

As regards the actual operation of the EPK, there were many accusations of inferior teaching practices. Billy Wapotro, president of the Protestant schooling authority, l'Alliance Scolaire, cited anecdotal evidence of former EPK pupils arriving at schools run by l'Alliance Scolaire with much lower than average abilities in basic literacy and numeracy. He argues that:

'In the EPK, they are creating illiterates. And this has very dangerous consequences, because these children could become the future exploited classes of the country'.

Humbert, as an EPK activist, believed the main problem with the internal functioning of the EPK was that insufficient attention was given to the reasons for the closure of EPK. He notes that people would simply give up on their work within their respective EPK, and leave

the movement without offering any explanation. And those who remained would not seek an explanation. This lack of evaluation meant that, instead of learning from problems or shortcomings, there was just a steady dissipation of energy and corresponding increase in the sense of frustration and isolation experienced by those who remained.

4.3 Anti-EPK Moves from within the Independence Movement

It has been shown that the shortcomings of the EPK and the opposition it encountered from the French Government and its allies were partly to blame for the failure of the EPK to realise the hopes that were placed in it. However, lack of support for as well as outright opposition to the EPK from within the independence movement was a more fundamental cause of its demise.

One of the main causes of tension from an early stage was that many prominent figures within the FLNKS, including some who argued in favour of the EPK, did not send their children to the EPK, or even participate in the boycott of the colonial school system in any way. This was a source of intense frustration because it made more difficult the EPK's task of reassuring parents that it offered a serious educational option for their children. In Poindimié, some FLNKS activists so resented the non-participation of leaders in the EPK that they burnt it down. Commenting on the action, activist Susanna Ouneï-Small remarked:

'They did not want to see the children from the tribes being brought into the EPK to learn the name of this or that tree, while some of the leaders of the FLNKS continued to send their children to the colonial schools to learn how to give them orders in the future'

Opposition from within the FLNKS also took the form of financial obstruction. The FLNKS rationale for returning to participate in the territorial institutions after the 1984 boycott had been to channel resources into alternative, FLNKS-controlled structures for resistance and development. However, even though as late as December 1988, the EPK was still formally acknowledged by the FLNKS as being a key structure of the movement, it had been very difficult to extract funding from the FLNKS-controlled Regions⁶. In one instance, as Déwé Gorodey from the Ponerihouen EPK explained, they had been promised money from their regional administration in 1985, but the funding was not made available until 1988. The EPK had been forced to close just weeks earlier.

⁶ Territorial elections, which were held in September 1985 as part of the Fabius Plan, saw the FLNKS participate and win a majority in three (Northern, Central and Loyalty Islands) out of four (the other being around Nouméa) Regions.

4.3.1 Conservative Opponents

One of the clearest declarations of opposition to the EPK from within the independence movement can be found in a confidential document prepared by the leaders of the Loyalty Islands region of the *Union Calédonienne* (UC), a member party of the FLNKS. It was produced towards the end of 1985, while the EPK was at its peak as a popular arm of the FLNKS. Because of the unusually revealing nature of this document, it is instructive to quote it at length:

"These EPK struggle schools have not succeeded in weakening the colonial school through lack of maturity and equally of strategy and tactics. ... Why would any man of reason give a moment's thought to 'sacrificing' his child in order to satisfy a political slogan, a blind fanaticism, a utopian ideology. How is it imaginable that the day after the 18th⁷ a one-hundred-year-old institution would disappear with the stroke of a pen. It is to do away with certain realities that are unavoidable and, in a positive sense, elementary...

"The advocates of the 'colonial' school ... believe in the virtue of reform. ... Furthermore, international or global competition demands that we be defended by serious and, above all, **competent** representatives (emphasis in original). Competent means qualified and French qualifications are sure guarantees in these international levels. Learning French, other than its virtues in opening new horizons to us and giving us access to a superior knowledge of a certain notion of freedom and of learning about the world, is also a significant if not the principal trump for successfully securing a good independence" [Union Calédonienne Région Isles].

The document reveals a deep faith in the superiority of French society and the education system upon which it is based. It shows an internalisation of the colonial definition of development being a process of making Kanak society more like that of France. Furthermore, it is virtually indistinguishable from the perspective presented by the Vice-Rectorat. It should be no surprise, therefore, that this view of education is preceded in the same document by an astounding interpretation of the thinking behind the formation of the FLNKS and its 1984 boycott campaign.

'Over a year ago, the FLNKS decided on a boycott of institutions in order to make the socialist government look again at a statute closer to the Canaque claims. The objective was not in the slightest to foment revolution but to destabilise the institutions in order to take account of these claims and make progress in the direction wanted by the independence movement. Within this strategy, it was out of

⁷ 18 November 1984 was the date of the election boycott.

the question to cut the umbilical cord with France (which would be suicidal), but to cry louder in order that she (France) would be more attentive and considerate. With dialogue proving ineffective, the last resort was to action. This was engaged in a good-natured way, but it led to things getting out of hand and unfortunate mistakes which proved difficult to halt. The EPK, which is more a political slogan than a genuine institution, is one of these mistakes' [Union Calédonienne, Region Isles].

The authors of this document who occupied key positions in the biggest party within the FLNKS, had political convictions which were seriously at odds with those contained in the FLNKS Charter and agreed on at congresses of the movement. Just as the EPK analysis of and commitment to usurping colonial education was intimately connected to a broader anti-colonial perspective, so too there is a continuity between the political and the educational perspectives articulated in the UC document.

Divisions within the FLNKS over the EPK did not, however, follow party lines. Within the UC, there were EPK supporters and activists like Néchéro-Jorédié. It was, however, difficult for many UC people to sustain their involvement in the EPK in the face of attacks from within their own party, and particularly from leaders. One UC member from St Louis reported that sustained pressure for an entire year from other UC people was instrumental in forcing the closure of the EPK in which he had been active.

4.3.2 Radical Reformist Opponents

Internal opposition to the EPK was by no means confined to the UC, however, and neither was it all a reflection of older conservative ideology. Amongst the most strident critics of the EPK were Elie Poigoune, a founder and leading figure in PALIKA (another member party of the FLNKS), and Paul Neaoutyine, a more recent but highly prominent member of PALIKA, who later served as FLNKS President from 1989 to 1995. It was Neaoutyine's dismissal from his teaching post and Poigoune's resignation in support of him that sparked the prolonged and militant protests and school boycotts of 1979.

Poigoune argued that insufficient thought was given to the creation of the EPK for it to be a school system for the entire population, and that it was irresponsible to call people to take part in an essentially experimental exercise without adequate preparation. More importantly, he believed that the existing school system was a useful starting point and that it was a mistake to consciously reject everything in it and try to establish a new system from scratch. Despite its pro-colonial dimensions, Poigoune argued, there are important elements within the French education system that Kanak people can take and use to their own advantage. He insisted on the importance of sending Kanak students to France for tertiary education,

arguing that although the school 'diffuses the bourgeois colonialist ideology ... it can also be, if we really want it to be, a formidable weapon which we can use against colonialism and to gain our liberation' [*Kanak*. Number 128, 1988].

The question remains, however, as to what such a strategy promises for the majority of Kanak youth who are eliminated from the education system well before tertiary level. Furthermore, Poigoune's acceptance of France's position as the source of knowledge and analytic skills makes even more difficult the already challenging task of breaking from the kind of mentality, as expressed in the UC document cited above, that has been conditioned by the colonial experience and continues to sustain colonial power relations.

Poigoune remained unapologetic about his promotion of a view that many activists in the movement and in his own party perceived to be conservative. One such critic from the Pouebo EPK, while conceding that some positive gains come from Kanak students studying in France, warned:

'If we continue to follow that logic, we end up saying that colonialism is a positive gain. I reject that view that Kanak people have to try to achieve within the existing society. This might solve a short-term problem, but the fundamental problem (of colonialism) remains'

Poigoune also criticised the EPK's preoccupation with Kanak custom and culture. He argued that culture and traditions are properly part of the family and traditional milieu. Although in favour of preserving and promoting the things which are of value from traditional society, Poigoune has insisted that they are not school subjects. Wapotro, by contrast, agreed with the EPK emphasis on Kanak culture. However, he maintained that this concern was already being addressed by existing schools.

The EPK replies that such initiatives are only tokens and that, as long as the ultimate orientation of the school system is towards a colonially defined system of knowledge and its associated qualifications, any introduction of Kanak culture is purely cosmetic.

Poigoune also insisted, as he had continued to do since 1979, that the real task of organising educational resistance needed to be undertaken within the existing institutions. The colonial system, he argued, much prefers to see activists establish parallel structures like the EPK than to have them engaged in a strong and well-organised union.

Officially, PALIKA supported the EPK. As a dissenting voice, Poigoune was in a minority and was regularly taken to task over the issue. Poigoune says that he is aware of his own position of privilege as a graduate and qualified secondary school teacher, and that he

consciously tries not to let that influence the political line that he promotes. However, this has not spared him from the accusation that his primary concern is with his own personal well-being. Although some former EPK people have been able to resume teaching careers, the sacrifices made by many others for their EPK involvement have been irredeemable. Furthermore, lingering bitterness still remains among some activists who, as secondary school students in 1979, abandoned their studies out of a political commitment to the schools boycott campaign, only to see promoters of the campaign doing very well for themselves.

4.3.3 Unity and Rupture

These types of accusation and recrimination, combined with the undeclared attacks from other sectors of the FLNKS, heightened tensions surrounding the EPK. Opinions for or against the EPK became increasingly entrenched. The end result was that the unity needed for the EPK to stand any chance of succeeding as a popular movement was lost. For any one of the many reasons noted above, parents began withdrawing their children. Once this process of marginalisation from the community began, it was very difficult to reverse and it resulted in many people who remained committed to the ideals of the EPK concluding that they had no option but to leave it.

In its early stages, the EPK had remained largely united in the face of disputes within the FLNKS. The contentious FLNKS decision to participate in the Fabius Regions was met by an EPK decision from its Ponerihouen Convention to remain 'in rupture'. Like many who invested so much in the EPK, Naaoutchoué recalled the unity and sense of purpose within the movement and blamed its demise on the lack of political direction from the FLNKS:

'When I think about the plenary meetings of the EPK - we used to have 300, 400, 500 people all participating in the discussion. It was a really strong movement at the time. But little by little, the FLNKS cut itself off from the EPK.'

Since 1987, Naaoutchoué argued, the FLNKS had no coordinated political strategy. Like many others within the EPK tendency, Naaoutchoué believes that the main failing of the FLNKS was its refusal to define its social project; that is, its vision of the society it was struggling to create. 'Ultimately, the school is the reproduction of the system, the society and everything', he argues. 'Theoretically, when a structure like the EPK is put in place, it corresponds with a social project'.

The absence of an agreed social project left the EPK in an untenable position. It also made it impossible to prevent debates within the EPK from ranging into the area of defining a social

project. Thus, debates within the FLNKS were eventually imported into and revisited within the EPK. And as division intensified within the FLNKS, it had an increasingly debilitating effect on the EPK.

The 1988 Matignon Accords which saw the FLNKS leadership agree to abandon the strategy of rupture, finally signalled the end of the EPK as a popular movement. By demobilising the Kanak population, the Accords removed the political framework within which the EPK had been able to operate after the 1985 decision to participate in the Fabius Regions. The EPK was conceived of and could only properly function as one element of a popular mobilisation.

The Accords also exacerbated the existing divisions within the FLNKS to an irreconcilable point. Two member groups, the FULK and USTKE resigned or were expelled, and large numbers of activists who had belonged to the FLNKS without being members of any particular party were also excluded. Many EPK activists as well as whole communities with functioning EPK, notably in Ouvéa and Lifou, were among those which parted company with the FLNKS.

9.6 Conclusion

As the Kanak desire for independence strengthened, so too did their commitment to change the existing education system into one of their own design. The EPK were the realisation of this wish, which had been building up for most of a decade, to break from an education system which served colonial interests and replace it with one which would meet the needs of Kanak people.

The EPK were established as structures of the struggle for Kanak socialist independence. Although there was not a uniform view of the extent of the political content they should embody, all involved saw the exercise as one of redefining the fundamental orientation of the school. That is, they saw themselves as preparing future generations for a new society. As part of the independence movement, the destiny of the EPK was inextricably linked with that of the overall struggle and, more particularly with that of the FLNKS. While in the early stages this proved advantageous for the EPK, it led eventually to their demise.

Although anti-EPK initiatives from pro-colonial forces played a significant part, the EPK ultimately failed in the form in which it was originally conceived because two essential conditions for its success were not retained by the FLNKS - if they had ever really existed. The first of these was a policy to implement a radical rupture with the political, economic and socio-cultural structures of French colonialism in New Caledonia in order to achieve

Kanak socialist independence. The second was a unified understanding of and commitment to what this entailed; both the means required to achieve it and the form that it would take.

The process of radicalisation which had intensified through the 1970s and early 80s appeared in 1984 to have given rise to a broad-based Kanak movement which was committed to turning back France's hegemonic hold over New Caledonia. As it transpired, however, French colonial rule proved considerably less brittle than many within the independence movement had anticipated. Although large numbers of alienated Kanak youth were ready for a radical rupture with colonialism, many within the FLNKS leadership retained a fundamental attachment to the relationship with France and the institutions upon which this was based. The Matignon Accords achieved for France what they were designed to do: to heighten the conflict between these competing perspectives and thereby weaken the independence movement.

The EPK as it originally conceived was a casualty of this. In Gossannah, however, the EPK has refused to die. Their thriving school gives hope to many people by serving as a living reminder of what Kanak people are capable of achieving for themselves. But that is another story.

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